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How to Remember 9/11



By NANCY GIBBS

1 hour, 9 minutes ago

If actions speak louder than elegy, it tells you where we are that the team coverage on the eve of the 6th anniversary of 9/11 alternated between General Petraeus' performance on Capitol Hill and Britney Spears' performance at the MTV Video Music Awards. Osama returned to prime time, only to be mocked for his "impotence" and apparent need for Grecian Formula. A New Jersey community that lost 100 people that day has had to delay expansion of its memorial because fundraising fell short. September 11 falls once again on a Tuesday, we are six years away from the fire, and wondering what that means.

A USA Today poll found that more than two thirds of Americans view 9/11 as the most memorable news event of their lifetime. Far from pressing it neatly between the pages of a heavy book, to be retrieved only on special occasions, the day in memory has gained in power and urgency. Nearly one third said the event changed the way they lived - which is up from 18% five years ago, as though it was possible to see the change, or at least safe to admit it without having to swat away charges that "the terrorists win" if you do anything differently.

The mass murder remains, more than ever, a collage of personal tragedies. The names are read out one at a time, people march with buttons bearing the face of the one they lost, lay a wreath at a memorial. 13 candles lit in the church that lost 13 members. People make mourning small enough to capture and coax into service: myGoodDeed.org was launched as the micromemorial, a vehicle for people to use the day to do something for someone else. So far 284,185 people have pledged a good deed, to donate blood, take clothes to the Goodwill, knit socks for soldiers, skip lunch and give the money away.

There are many people, of course, who don't need to be reminded to remember. There are the moms sending children who never met their fathers off to their first day of kindergarten. There are the first responders who are discovering that they are sick and in need of treatment, including 2000 New York City fire fighters. There are the presidential candidates who regularly patrol the sacred ground; Giuliani goes there in every speech, Edwards talked about confronting terrorism a few blocks from Ground Zero, and the entire political debate this week is wrapped around the progress of a war that magnifies memory and distorts it. The 9/11 attack united us; the response to it divides us.

The homefront remains on alert, but in a leisurely, one eye open kind of way. Police at the Pentagon scrape the air for signs of radiation or chemical attack, track the wind direction to guide escaping employees. But 9/11 Commission chairs Tom Kean and Lee Hamilton used the anniversary to remind people that security remains a shield with holes. Most air cargo is still not screened, the high tech bomb detectors are indefinitely delayed, and Congress demands tighter standards for drivers' licenses but won't fund them. The broadcast industry has until 2009 to turn over the spectrum that rescuers need to beam signals through concrete and steel. Three years ago, Kean and Hamilton observe, their commission noted that the Department of Homeland Security reported to 88 congressional committees and subcommittees. At least that number has now been pared down - to 86.

Some people fear complacency; others fear forgetting. Others have only limited space in memory, and the day is overwritten by the events that followed, by war and hurricane and every family's private trials. But the record can't be erased, any more than a year can have 364 days, and anything can bring it back full screen, like a glance at a skyline, a siren in the distance, a prayer that comes as reflex as you walk to work and remember the day they never came home.

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Six Years Later: What Is 9/11?

RealClearPolitics

Reid Wilson

1 hour, 34 minutes ago

In the six years after the World Trade Centers collapsed, six years after a plane crashed into the Pentagon and another into a field in Pennsylvania, the world has changed dramatically. In that time, the United States has found itself both at the apex and the abyss of its popularity in the world. The issues Americans are concerned with, and over which elections are primarily fought, are largely derivations of the consequences of the attacks, consequences ranging from the war in Iraq to security at home.

More than 80% of Americans agree that September 11th was the most significant historical event during their lifetimes, according to a new Zogby poll, but although it has become such a defining moment for so many, few scholars or politicians agree on just what the attacks have created or where they will fit in history books.

The debate begins with the most obvious product of the events of September 11th: The newly articulated "war on terror," a phrase first uttered by President Bush in his address to the nation that evening. Taken literally, most scholars agree that there can be no "war on terror," as such, as terror is a tactic rather than a tangible enemy.

"The United States, indeed the West, is at war with al Qaeda and its affiliates," said Professor Douglas Lovelace, a terrorism expert at the U.S. Army War College. "Terrorism is the principal, but not the only, tactic employed by al Qaeda and its affiliates."

Bush has long maintained that Iraq is the "central front" in the war on terror, and using the term "war," some say, has been a tactic used to fold actual wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into a larger context. "The military intervention in Iraq and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan has de-metaphored the war on terror to include actual military interventions," said University of South Carolina Professor Mathieu Deflem. Those who call it a war "have also been attempting to have the military metaphor determine other components of counter-terrorism. Thus, for instance, terrorist suspects have been tried at military tribunals [and] held without charge."

The debate sounds like an argument over semantics, and politicians making homeland security and a struggle against terrorists use language different from that of the White House. Rudy Giuliani, aside from President Bush the man most closely associated with the response to the attacks, refer to the "terrorists' war on us," or, in a recent essay in Foreign Affairs magazine, the "terrorists' war on global order." Fred Thompson, among many others, refers to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, while Mitt Romney talks of "defeating the Jihadists."

On the other side, Democrats have also sought to change the words with which the debate is conducted, and have been more active in trying to separate the war in Iraq from any war on terror. Former Senator John Edwards has called for moving past "the empty slogan 'war on terror,'" a statement met with both applause and derision. Hillary Clinton has addressed the "threats we face from terrorism," and Barack Obama echoes Giuliani, declaring at an early August speech that "the terrorists are at war with us." "America is at war with terrorists who killed on our soil," he continued.

Whatever politicians and experts prefer to call the conflict, many debate just when this struggle against Islamic radicals began. "Islamist terrorism has grown and developed over the years," Deflem said.

In some ways, the language one uses to discuss the conflict defines when scholars believe it began. The one thing on which virtually everyone agrees: September 11th was simply the most obvious event in a much longer historical process.

Lovelace suggests that "reasonable people can disagree on the specific start date" of a war with terrorists. "Terrorism was not the invention of 9/11," Deflem said. Without offering a specific event as a clear beginning, Deflem said the attack "was the outcome of a lengthier process, building up since shortly after the Gulf War, and in other ways even sooner."

Some see the conflict in a very different light. "There is a war going on, but we are ultimately on its periphery," said Brian Fishman, a senior associate in the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Extremist Salafis, from which al Qaeda springs, have been engaged in a pitched battle with moderate Muslims "for millennia in one form or another," he said.

Lovelace said others might point to bombings of a hotel in Aden, Yemen, in 1992, aimed at killing U.S. Marines on their way to Somalia, as the start of the conflict; no Marines dies, though two Western tourists were killed. Still others, he says, might argue that the battle began when Osama bin Laden issued his first fatwa against the West in 1996. Lovelace himself believes the embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya, the beginning of al Qaeda's current strategy of attacks, were the beginning of the struggle, in 1998.

Fishman goes back farther, to 1979, and what he calls "the beginning of the modern Jihadi-Salafi movement." That year, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan; a Saudi insurgent named Juhaiman al-Utaibi took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca for three days, in an effort to overthrow the government of Saudi Arabia; and a revolution in Iran proved to many that a movement could overthrow a Western-backed government.

Experts agree that, in the battle with terrorists, al Qaeda and its associates are the most dangerous threat to the U.S. But America is not all they are concerned with. Al Qaeda, Fishman says, "has always held that its most important fight is within the Islamic world," primarily against Western-backed and apostate leaders. Al Qaeda's focus on American targets, he says, are guaranteed to produce less backlash among Arab nations.

Even anniversary commemorations are subject to debate. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg found controversy when he invited his predecessor, Giuliani, to speak at a Ground Zero ceremony today. The former mayor's decision to participate enraged the New York Times and some victims' family members, who said the presidential candidate's participation would politicize a solemn ceremony.

While the world has changed dramatically in the six years since another clear morning in September, the only thing that seems clear is disagreement from all sides. Some, like language, are little more than semantic debates. Others, like debates over starting dates, are important to understanding the enemy. Still others, like commemorations, belie the deep pain many still feel over that day. History will teach us more, but history takes more than six years.

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